



THE SIMONS CENTER  
FOR ETHICAL LEADERSHIP AND INTERAGENCY COOPERATION

# Inter Agency Paper

No. 20W  
January 2025

## Why Did NATO's Post-Cold War Policy Toward Russia Fail?

Tom Kühnel

**Simons Center**  
*for Ethical Leadership and  
Interagency Cooperation*

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas

An Interagency Occasional Paper published  
by the CGSC Foundation Press



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This paper examines the evolution of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Russia relations from the end of the Cold War to the present, focusing on the key events, ideological differences, and narratives that have shaped their interactions. It identifies the fundamental differences between NATO and Russia, including their historical experiences, population characteristics, geographical factors, and national self-images. It highlights how these baseline differences, particularly Russia's preference for stability over democracy and the cultural acceptance of disorder, have influenced NATO's and Russia's respective security perspectives and policy decisions.

The paper calls for further research into how a more assertive NATO policy earlier on might have impacted the trajectory of NATO-Russia relations and the Ukraine conflict, suggesting that such insights could inform future policy decisions.

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# Introduction

*I myself and the Russian leadership have no doubt about our partnership. We'll build the partnership on the basis of our friendship, yours and mine, and we'll do so for the sake of world peace.<sup>1</sup>*

– Boris Yeltzin, June 1995

**B**oris Yeltsin's buoyant assertion in 1995 reflected the optimism for a new era in NATO-Russia relations after the Cold War. The end of the Cold War marked a turning point and a new beginning in the relationship between NATO and Russia. It was the end of the bipolar world order, and with it, great hopes emerged in the West for a new type of relationship with Russia—Russia as a partner rather than an enemy. The integration of Russia into a common European security architecture was anticipated, with an expectation of spreading Western values throughout the territory of the former Warsaw Pact.

The quote from Yeltsin suggests that these expectations were not entirely one-sided; the Russian leadership also appeared interested in fundamentally transforming NATO-Russia relations, with Yeltsin speaking of a partnership. These initially abstract ambitions quickly manifested in concrete joint measures to change the European security architecture, beginning with the joint return of all nuclear weapons from Ukraine and Kazakhstan to Russia and treaties for mutual nuclear disarmament. Russia's entry into the Partnership for Peace (PFP) and the peak of cooperation during the Bosnian War, where a Russian brigade operated alongside a NATO brigade and ultimately reported to a NATO general, exemplified the realization of publicly stated intentions for fundamental change within the first few years after the Cold War.

Nevertheless, a closer look at the motives and positions from which the two actors were operating at that time reveals early signs of the issues that would arise in the following years. This paper investigates why NATO's Russia policy approach failed after the end of the Cold War. The central argument focuses on Russia's concept of national security and perceived threats, as well as the influence of narratives within Russia, analyzed using the "narrative three-step model." The analysis includes key arguments such as the importance of understanding Russia's security perspective and the

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ideological narratives that have shaped Russian actions.

The paper provides an abbreviated chronology of events, describing key events and their implications. It starts with the baseline differences between NATO and Russia, moves through significant developments in the 1990s, the resurgence of the anti-Western narrative under Putin, the brief thaw during Medvedev's presidency, the annexation of Crimea, and finally the invasion of Ukraine. This progression illustrates the gradual deterioration of relations and the underlying reasons for the failure of NATO's approach.

## **Baseline Differences**

To comprehend the relationship between NATO and Russia after the end of the Cold War and how it has evolved to its current state, it is essential to first understand the fundamental differences between these two actors. These differences are deeply rooted in their history, population characteristics, geographical factors, and national self-images. Recognizing these basic distinctions allows us to grasp the underlying thought patterns and codes of conduct of both systems. Some of these differences may seem obvious, but they are nonetheless crucial. Understanding these differences and the thought patterns behind them enables us to interpret actions often perceived as aggressive by the other party. It allows us to understand why red lines were drawn where they were and what aspects of national identity underlie these boundaries.

**For Russians, stability is often more valued than creating a democratically structured state.**

### **IMPORTANCE OF STABILITY OVER DEMOCRACY IN RUSSIA**

For Russians, stability is often more valued than creating a democratically structured state. Especially in the period between the collapse of the Soviet Union and the inauguration of Vladimir Putin, Russian society was shown what consequences an unstable domestic political situation can have for them personally. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked a starting point for a period characterized by economic hardship, political instability, and social unrest. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy led to widespread poverty, hyperinflation, and unemployment. Corruption and crime surged and many Russians faced a drastic decline in living standards. Political struggles included the 1993 constitutional crisis and conflicts over economic reforms, contributing to a sense of disillusionment and chaos.<sup>2</sup> In the chaos of these years and the resulting renewed desire for political stability, regardless of the price, lies the main reason for Vladimir Putin's long-term political success. His actions, especially in the first few years of his term of



office, the progress of reassurance in Chechnya, and the economic reorganization of the country are examples of this focus on stability.<sup>3</sup> Providing this stability is Putin's part of the quiet deal that the Russian leadership and its people have. The leadership provides stability in the country, and, in return, gets a population that is content with the current undemocratic circumstances in the country, gives the leadership a free hand in almost all areas of politics, and allows the leadership to get away with a high level of corruption.

This relationship between the Russian government and population can be described as a classic, albeit radical, example of the security-freedom tension. In this case, the Russian population gives up its democratic free rights almost completely, and, in return, receives security from arbitrary violence and instability. Incidentally, this deal is also one of the greatest potential dangers of the Ukraine-war for the Russian leadership. If they do not succeed in keeping the war and its effects far away from the citizens of Russia, they will break their implicit promise of providing security and stability, which would jeopardize the basis for their pursuit of power. Possible examples of this could be further Russian mobilization or increased fighting on Russian territory. Both undermined the stability of everyday life for the Russian population.

The 1990s brought back the desire for stability, which continues today, into the focus of the Russian population. The origins of this thought pattern go back much further. As Thomas Wilhelm, retired Director of the Foreign Military Studies Office at the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, emphasized nearly every Russian generation has faced at least one major crisis, and each of these crises had the potential to threaten the very existence of the Russian nation. This constant threat to the pure existence of the state then created the deep-seated need for stability to ensure survival.<sup>4</sup>

### **"BARDAK"**

The long-term and omnipresent existence of crisis and existential threat has reinforced yet another cultural concept in the Russian population. A concept named "Bardak," a term that signifies *disorder* and *fiasco*, is a Russian term that reflects a cultural acceptance and normalization of chaos in governance and daily life. Ruslan Pukhov, Director of the Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, emphasized that Western observers often misinterpret Russian actions because they analyze them through a Western lens, expecting orderly and predictable behavior. He pointed out, "Every time some Western observer says, 'Russians did this, Russia did that,' I say: 'You describe Russians like they are Germans and Americans. We are not.'"<sup>5</sup> Bardak describes not only the presence of disorder,

**Bardak...is a Russian term that reflects a cultural acceptance and normalization of chaos in governance and daily life.**

**...events that appear catastrophic to Western observers are widely accepted in Russia, and why those responsible often face no major consequences.**

but also how to deal with it, a form of acceptance and approval of disorder. Understanding this pattern of behavior, prevalent both in the Russian leadership and the general population, explains why events that appear catastrophic to Western observers are widely accepted in Russia, and why those responsible often face no major consequences.

It may sound contradictory at first that there is a general desire for stability in Russia, while at the same time there is a concept such as Bardak, which describes the accepted way of dealing with disorder. Here, it is important to differentiate between two levels on which the two—desire for stability and Bardak—are based. The desire for stability refers to the structural level of the state, while the acceptance of fiascos refers to the level of implementation of individual operations. Thus, the state must provide a stable security and military structure that makes it impossible for regions, such as Chechnya in the 1990s, to launch independence movements. The way in which individual measures are implemented to prevent this and possible misappropriations (e.g., large parts of the military budget disappearing in corruption) is irrelevant if structural stability is guaranteed. One possible example to illustrate this is the current situation in Russia. Despite the increasingly difficult economic situation due to the war economy and the direct consequences of the war for many Russian families, the situation in the country remains stable. Approval ratings for the government are consistently stable and there are no signs of unrest among the population.

This again highlights the silent deal between the leadership and the population in Russia. Ensuring structural stability not only justifies the suspension of democratic principles, but can also be achieved by almost any means, no matter how chaotic from a Western perspective. Here it is important to emphasize that the full implementation of Bardak means that such fiascos or disorders are no longer seen as such, but, rather, as a normal path and as the price of stability. This is the reason why Western analysts often overestimate the possible negative consequences for the Russian leadership of chaotically executed political decisions or corruption incidents. They assume that Russian society would apply Western evaluation standards to its government. A useful thought experiment to illustrate this is the Prigozhin uprising at the end of May 2023. Imagine what the consequences of a similar uprising would have been for almost any other government in the world, democratic or authoritarian. The speed with which everything was back to normal in Russia can hardly be explained by a Western understanding of how states function. Also, the lack of consequences or changes for the Russian leadership after the coup are also completely in line with this Western understanding.

It should nevertheless be emphasized that the Russian government’s almost absolute freedom of action cannot, of course, be explained solely by the “silent deal” with the population and its indifference to government action. Ubiquitous propaganda, the lack of a free press, separation of powers, or political opposition, as well as the deliberate limitation of the middle class—which typically initiates democratization processes and advocates for better education—are also central factors for the freedom of action Russian leadership possesses. Since I could not access the article directly, I will provide an argument based on the general themes commonly discussed in analyses of Russian politics and the concept of Bardak.

In this context, it is important to recognize that the concept of Bardak is not merely present, but deeply embedded in the Russian national psyche. As noted in various analyses, including by Western observers, this concept influences how Russian society navigates and rationalizes the frequent chaos and disorder in its governance. The *New York Times*, for example, highlights that Russia’s historical and cultural experiences have shaped a unique tolerance for disorder and a distinct approach to governance that contrasts sharply with Western expectations of order and predictability. This deep-seated acceptance of Bardak helps explain why seemingly catastrophic events are often perceived differently within Russia, and why those responsible for such events frequently escape significant consequences.

### **THE FOCUS OF THE RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT**

The next significant difference between Russia and the NATO countries is the primary focus of their respective governments. What does the Russian government use this high degree of freedom of action and power for? According to Anders Puck Nielsen, a Danish military analyst, the primary goal of the Russian leadership is to maintain its own power. If push came to shove, the Russian leadership would even accept a defeat in the Ukraine war to ensure this.<sup>6</sup> This priority leads to minimal investment in education or the welfare state and more focus on military spending and creating a specific, national narrative, which heroizes its own government while naming clear enemies outside of the country. The economic use of the “broken window fallacy,” which suggests that money spent on repairing damage boosts economic activity, is evident in the increased military spending. This led not only to the reconstruction of the Russian army in the early 2000s but also currently stabilizes the situation of the Russian army in Ukraine. Additionally, it boosts GDP, with both factors being used to reinforce their own narrative.

The significant focus on military spending also helps the

**...the primary goal of the Russian leadership is to maintain its own power.**

government to deliberately avoid the building of a strong middle class, as an educated and economically empowered middle class could again pose a threat to its power. In this conscious retrenchment of large sections of the population, the government once again uses the concept of bardak, disorder and low standards, coupled with massive repression, propaganda, and minimal spending in the welfare state, creates a population that lacks meaning and perspective. Bardak now leads the general population to accept these facts, this fiasco, usually without opposition. This makes it more feasible for the propaganda to name clear opponents and justify the actions of the Russian leadership, which ensures the approval of the population and thus the maintenance of power of the Russian leadership.

### **THE FUNCTIONING OF NATO**

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On the other side of this relationship, NATO stands as an organization established by and for democratic states with free-market economies. It primarily comprises European and North Atlantic countries. The alliance is built on the principles of democracy, individual liberty, separation of power, and the rule of law. These principles are reflected in NATO's operational strategies and objectives, which emphasize collective defense, crisis management, and cooperative security with the superior goal of protecting the fundamental values of their members.<sup>7</sup> NATO's foundational values inherently contrast with the Russian prioritization of stability and power retention, leading to differing approaches in international relations and security policies. When analyzing NATO and its actions, it is also important to consider that NATO, or rather the Western states it comprises, represents a distinctly multipolar society. In Western states, there is a much larger number of relevant actors who possess direct or indirect power. This ranges from the separation of powers, through the free press, to civil society.

This distribution of power among many actors means that the decisions of individual governments, and thus of NATO, do not merely reflect the priorities and worldviews of the inner leadership circle, as is the case in Russia, but are instead the result of many influences. This leads, as will become clear in the course of analyzing NATO-Russia relations, to a significantly lower consistency in the approach to Russia. Different interpretations of Russian actions, different ideas of what the long-term relationship should look like, and different perceptions of what was promised and what was not, changed repeatedly over the years, fundamentally shaping the nature of NATO's Russia-approach. This—in particular, the frequent changes of course of the European NATO partners in questions of the form of cooperation with Russia—is often interpreted by Russian analysts as deliberately aggressive behavior. But usually, it is just a

result of democratic processes of change. However, from a Russian perspective, where the political views of the leadership circle and actual political actions are almost completely identical, this may naturally appear illogical and thus deliberate.

It is also important to note that NATO's positions are the result of the sum of the positions of all individual member states, considering their respective influence. NATO policy, depending on the unity of its members about the current topic, is therefore more of a compromise than an absolute stance. This also works in the reverse direction; NATO decisions still have to pass through the filter of the national politics of each individual member. The path from a policy decision on NATO level to implementation is therefore significantly longer than in Russia. Sometimes goals are (on purpose) not even reached, as seen with many of the European NATO partners, over the course of the last few years.<sup>8</sup>

It can be stated that NATO and Russia primarily differ in their fundamental approaches, goals, and the influences on and within the politics of each actor. In Russia, there is a strong concentration of power within the inner circle of the government and the people are kept out of politics through propaganda, restrictions on freedoms, and the 'silent deal' to ensure stability. In contrast, within NATO member states, politics is just one, albeit likely the strongest, actor among many that all influence the formulation of political ideas. The Russian model, therefore, is much more direct, undemocratic, but also more consistent in how political decisions are implemented. The goals of the two actors also differ significantly. In Russia, it is about maintaining structural stability for the population and retaining power for the government. In contrast, NATO's goal is the protection of its own values and freedoms.

**The path from a policy decision on NATO level to implementation is therefore significantly longer than in Russia.**

## **1990-1999: The Post-Cold War Era and the Emergence of New Tensions**

The 1990s began with a momentous event: the reunification of Germany. The fall of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989 symbolized the collapse of the communist regime in East Germany and ignited the process of German reunification. The end of this process was achieved on October 3, 1990, when the German Democratic Republic (East Germany) was officially incorporated into the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). This marked the starting point of the new post-cold war era in the relations between East and West. The German reunification also marked the

**The new Russian leadership under Yeltsin initially seemed ready to adapt to U.S. expectations and showed willingness to move the country in a more democratic direction. However...**

first in a series of events that would decisively shift the balance of power between NATO and Russia (or the USSR) in favor of NATO. The reunification meant that NATO's Article 5 would extend to the entire new German federal territory, effectively constituting the first quasi eastward expansion of NATO and significantly strengthening NATO's position in central Europe.

The next event contributing to this shift in the balance of power between NATO and the Soviet Union was the Second Persian Gulf War, which occurred shortly thereafter. The broad worldwide support, the swift victory, and the manner in which victory was achieved clearly demonstrated the superiority of the U.S. and its allies in modern warfare.<sup>9</sup>

The USSR was further weakened by internal political instability during these years. The first peak of this instability was the coup against the then-government in the summer of 1991 and the brief ousting of Gorbachev as head of government. Even though this coup was quickly resolved and the government regained its position of power, it nevertheless revealed and exacerbated the existential crisis of the Soviet Union. This crisis ultimately culminated in the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and, at the end of 1991, the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

These events led to the situation that will serve as the starting point for this analysis. On one side of the newly forming relations, we have NATO, led by the U.S., on the victorious side of the Cold War, convinced that their Western values would spread to the "new" Eastern European, former Soviet Union, countries and integrate them into their sphere of influence. On the other side is Russia, the loser of the Cold War, weakened by the internal political storms of the late years of the Soviet Union. The new Russian leadership under Yeltsin initially seemed ready to adapt to U.S. expectations and showed willingness to move the country in a more democratic direction. However, what emerged in Russia was a dilemma between the country's short-term (internal political) problems and its long-term foreign policy goals. This dilemma would lay the foundation for the resurgence of the anti-West narrative in Russia over the next years, which again is the groundwork for the current conflicts in Europe and the new East-West tensions.

The Yeltsin government was initially very receptive to the West, a receptiveness largely based on the fact that Russia desperately needed economic aid from the West to maintain its country, let alone the aid it would need to carry out long-term reforms. The West gladly granted this aid, believing it to be the first step towards a long-term partnership desired by both sides. In the early 1990s, there was every reason to believe in this partnership. Representatives from both sides publicly emphasized their interest to move Russia in a

democratic direction, while the Russian side expressed gratitude for American/Western help.<sup>10</sup>

However, this is where the first part of Russia's reform dilemma comes into play. The internal political situation in Russia, or at least Yeltsin's interpretation of it, led Yeltsin to begin implementing reforms without first establishing the necessary framework. Russia left the old, planned economy system and began reforming into a new market-capitalist system, without having adapted its country, infrastructure, welfare state, or legal system. Yeltsin opted for "liberal shock therapy," where he and his administration prioritized the speed of implementation over substantive perfection.<sup>11</sup> This approach led to a massive economic crisis, manifesting in hyperinflation, unemployment, and a sharp decline in GDP.<sup>12</sup> To understand why Yeltsin chose this method of reform implementation, it has to be noted again that the baseline differences between Russia and the West lie in the Russian government's primary focus on ensuring its own position of power. The reform method he chose, therefore, did not primarily aim to be the best possible substantive reform, but rather to consolidate Yeltsin's position of power. From this perspective, one could even argue that, from Yeltsin's point of view, the reforms were at least a partial success, as they reinforced his position of power.

The rapid and almost uncontrolled implementation of the reforms allowed the old power circles from Soviet days to transform their political and economic power into the ownership of former state companies, and even more economic wealth and power. This birthed the oligarchy in Russia and also provided Yeltsin with an opportunity to consolidate his own power by bringing the unelected power elite of Russia onto the winning side of his reforms.

The Russian population on the other hand was on the losing side of the reforms. The newly created economic system and the resulting economic crisis particularly affected ordinary Russians, leading to a decline in life expectancy and higher mortality rates during the years following the reforms.<sup>13</sup> The reforms that were intended to bring Russia closer to the West, and for which the West publicly expressed its support, resulted in only a deterioration of living conditions and the overall situation in the country for the general Russian populace. This set the stage for the imminent resurgence of the anti-NATO and anti-West narrative.

At the level of international cooperation, however, the early 1990s saw significant improvements in relations between Russia and NATO. Efforts to implement a partnership began to yield multiple projects with tangible success. The cooperation initially included the joint return of nuclear missiles from Ukraine and Kazakhstan to Russia and the establishment of treaties for nuclear disarmament.<sup>14</sup>

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**The PFP represented an opportunity for Russia to move the Western security architecture away from NATO while being part of it.**

The partnership was intensified in 1993 with the establishment of the Partnership for Peace (PFP), with Russia joining as the first member. The PFP aimed to integrate the no longer under the Soviet Eastern European states into the Western security architecture through formal agreements. Russia's participation in the PFP can initially be viewed as a success and perhaps the peak of cooperation between Russia and NATO. However, the differing interpretations of what the PFP should represent laid the groundwork for future conflicts between East and West.

For the Russian leadership, the PFP represented an alternative to NATO. Shortly after the end of the Cold War, Russia perceived NATO as obsolete. The dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and the USSR had removed the reasons for NATO's existence. This view, never shared by NATO members, was therefore never seriously discussed. The PFP represented an opportunity for Russia to move the Western security architecture away from NATO while being part of it.<sup>15</sup>

However, Eastern European countries joining the PFP saw it as a step towards NATO membership, a transitional solution on the way to full membership. This differing understanding of the PFP was partly rooted in the different goals of the member states but was also fueled by the West, whether knowingly or unknowingly. This discrepancy became evident in a meeting between Secretary of State Warren Christopher and President Yeltsin, where Yeltsin explicitly stated that he saw the PFP as a NATO alternative.<sup>16</sup> The PFP itself was initially effective in its original purpose of fostering cooperation in security matters across all European countries. It laid the groundwork for collaboration in the Yugoslav conflict in 1994, arguably the high point of NATO-Russia relations post-Cold War.

Thus, the first half of the 1990s can be considered a success in NATO-Russia relations, especially when using the Cold War as a benchmark. However, this period also sowed the seeds for the eventual deterioration of these relationships, which began in the mid-1990s and were influenced by three central factors: the domestic political situation in Russia, the initial concept that the Russian leadership would always prioritize securing its power, and the arrogance and naivety of Western allies.

Since Yeltsin's "liberal shock therapy" at the beginning of the decade, the situation in Russia had steadily worsened. Besides the direct economic consequences, the approach also fostered the establishment of mafia structures.<sup>17</sup> The looming secession of Chechnya and the resulting civil war further plunged Russia into an existential crisis, threatening the current government's power. This government, in turn, prioritized securing its power above all else and was willing to sacrifice everything for this goal. To maintain its power, the Russian government needed an explanation for the



country's dire situation, one that deflected blame away from it.

Thus, Yeltsin began crafting a new narrative around the time of the 1996 Russian presidential elections. This narrative was designed to secure his re-election in the short term and to explain the causes of Russia's miserable state in the long term—by blaming the West. He began to emphasize traditional Russian values and portrayed the West as morally degenerate, contributing to a nationalist and conservative narrative. This narrative framed the West as an existential threat to Russia's identity and sovereignty, fostering a sense of victimization and the need for Russia to assert its great power status independently of Western influence.<sup>18</sup> This strategy found fertile ground, as evidenced by his initially unlikely victory in the 1996 elections, unlikely from the perspective that he was the President of Russia during the period of domestic turmoil in the early 1990s. This is not particularly surprising when considering that the reforms that had significantly destabilized Russia were always associated with the West. The West was the enemy once again.

The new narrative in Russia accused the West of consciously exploiting the current power dynamics between the two actors to destabilize Russia, consolidate its own power, and achieve dominance in Europe. This is where the wishful thinking and naivete—some would simply call it arrogance—of the Western allies come into play. While the new Russian narrative initially served only as a campaign tool, it subsequently became a central part of Russian domestic policy. However, the West completely underestimated it, deemed it unimportant in their actions, and ultimately fueled it with their decisions in the late 1990s.

At the beginning of this narrative formation, it could still be easily argued that it was a baseless strategy to consolidate one's own power, something even Yeltsin himself did not believe. For instance, during the 1996 election campaign, Yeltsin openly demanded that there should be no NATO expansion, yet he had secretly discussed with President Clinton that such an expansion could occur, provided Clinton did not announce it until after Yeltsin's re-election. This dual approach highlighted the complex and often contradictory nature of Russia's foreign policy narrative during this period.<sup>19</sup>

So, it can be argued that the West had reason to believe that Russia's actions were merely a calculated strategy. However, the complete disregard of this perspective and NATO's actions from 1996 to 1999 turned this strategy into a self-fulfilling prophecy. The two key events that catalyzed this transformation were NATO's bombings during the second Balkans conflict and the eastward expansion of NATO in 1999.

NATO's bombing campaign on Yugoslav cities in 1999, carried out without a UN mandate, was perceived in Russia as a blatant

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**NATO's actions led the Russian leadership to believe their own narrative.**

disregard for international law and a direct affront to Russian interests. This military intervention, combined with NATO's first eastward expansion to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, intensified Russian fears of encirclement and perceived Western aggression. Particularly critical for Russia in both events was the fact that Russia had protested against both actions, yet the West completely ignored these protests.<sup>20</sup> This demonstrated that the West viewed Russia as a "has-been" power at that time. Due to its internal political situation, Russia lacked the power to enforce its demands.

It became clear to Russia that the mutual balance of power present during the Cold War era no longer existed, and that it no longer operated on the same level as NATO. Consequently, Russia realized it could no longer directly influence or prevent NATO's actions. This period showed Russia that the West no longer considered it a great power. As a result, Russia's view of NATO changed significantly. NATO was now seen as an offensive organization, a threat to Russia. It confirmed what Yeltsin had publicly told his people—NATO aimed to threaten Russia and sought (offensive) dominance in Europe. This perception of NATO as an existential threat reinforced the anti-Western narrative and deepened the rift in NATO-Russia relations.

NATO's actions led the Russian leadership to believe their own narrative. Initially devised as a strategy for maintaining power, this narrative was transformed into a new worldview for the Russian leadership, driven by NATO's perceived lack of understanding or arrogance regarding Russian domestic politics. NATO inadvertently provided supporting evidence for a thesis that originally lacked solid proof, thereby laying the groundwork for the failure of the NATO-Russia partnership.

The long-term problem arising from this situation was that the Russian leadership, both under Yeltsin and later under Putin, felt vindicated in their fundamental claim justifying their foreign policy. Since this claim was used not only to justify foreign policy, but also to consolidate their own power, it became difficult for them to deviate from this course. They had reintroduced the narrative of NATO as an enemy to the Russian public and NATO had supplied the evidence to support it. This situation ties back to a fundamental principle of Russian society: stability over democracy. The instability in Russia, with NATO now framed as the responsible party, positioned NATO as an existential threat to Russia. According to this narrative, NATO endangered Russia's stability. Accepting this as a given, the logical conclusion from a Russian perspective was clear. The government had to improve the domestic situation while combating the perceived root cause the domestic crisis—

NATO—even at the expense of democratization efforts. Stability in Russia was considered more crucial than democracy. This was the situation Putin encountered when he assumed office as President of Russia. Analyzing his policies since then reveals an adherence to the course described above, albeit through a more complex and less straightforward path.

It can be concluded that the 1990s laid the foundation for both the current relations between NATO and Russia and for most armed conflicts or wars in Europe since then. The 1990s can undoubtedly be seen as a missed opportunity for fundamental change, but the mistakes both sides made in their approach to implementing these changes ultimately prevented their achievement.

Russia’s rapid shift from a planned economy to a market-capitalist system under Yeltsin’s “liberal shock therapy” led to severe economic hardship for ordinary Russians. This economic turmoil facilitated the rise of new oligarchic structures and widespread corruption, further destabilizing the nation. Despite the West’s initial support and aid, the reforms resulted in a deteriorating quality of life for many Russians, sowing seeds of resentment and mistrust towards the West.

By the mid-1990s, Yeltsin’s government began to craft a new narrative to secure his political power amidst the economic chaos. This narrative, which portrayed the West as morally degenerate and an existential threat to Russian sovereignty, found fertile ground among a populace disillusioned by the economic crisis. The 1996 presidential election campaign saw Yeltsin openly criticizing NATO expansion while secretly negotiating its terms with the West, highlighting the dual approach of his administration.

The West’s naivete in underestimating the impact of its actions on Russia’s domestic politics and its wishful thinking that Russia would become a close partner transformed what was initially a strategic narrative into a deeply held belief. The Russian leadership, both under Yeltsin and later Putin, felt vindicated in their portrayal of NATO as a threat. This narrative, initially a tool for political consolidation, became a central part of Russian domestic and foreign policy.

Although the relationship between NATO and Russia was not yet completely destroyed at the beginning of the 2000s and had not fallen back to the level of Cold War times, the foundation was laid during these years that would eventually tip the relationship. These years generated a narrative in Russia, which, in the eyes of the Russians, was proven by NATO, making it increasingly impossible over the coming years to perceive NATO’s actions as anything but aggressive, offensive, and anti-Russian. Ultimately, the West must be blamed for this as well, as it exploited its dominant position

**Despite the West’s initial support and aid, the reforms resulted in a deteriorating quality of life for many Russians, sowing seeds of resentment and mistrust towards the West.**

and Russia's weak situation during these years to push through its political goals. A mix of arrogance, a failure to closely engage with developments in Russia or considering them unimportant, combined with the naive belief that Russia would align with the West in the long term regardless of Western actions, ultimately led to the failure of these relations. From today's perspective, this is particularly tragic as the view that Russia was a "has-been power" proved to be incorrect and the 1990s laid the groundwork for the failure of a relationship with a militarily resurgent great power from the 2000s onward.

We need to wait the new times all over again, because we missed our chance in the Nineties.

– Svetlana Alexievich<sup>21</sup>

## The Three-Step Narrative Process

The understanding of the development and consequences of the narratives in Russia and NATO about each other is of central importance for understanding this relationship. The last chapter outlined how and why the narratives on both sides emerged. This chapter will introduce a concept that explains the importance of narratives to political decisions and is intended to serve as an argumentative bridge to understand how the development of narratives in Russia and NATO is connected with policy decisions on both sides.

**Initially, political narratives are crafted by leaders to serve specific strategic purposes.**

### STEP 1: CRAFTING NARRATIVES FOR STRATEGIC GAIN

Initially, political narratives are crafted by leaders to serve specific strategic purposes. These narratives are not necessarily believed by the leaders themselves but are designed to influence public opinion and secure political gains. It must, of course, be noted here that the development of political narratives is not a monocausal process. To say that the political leadership of a country simply crafts a narrative would be a drastic oversimplification. It is more about political leadership, identifying an emerging trend in society and fueling it, possibly modifying it in such a way that the desired political narrative results from it. The type of government, or the level of control over civil society and the media's influence, is crucial for its implementation. The more control the respective government has, the better it will be able to establish its narrative or shape it according to its ideas. The developments described in the last chapter can serve well as two examples of different types of this development.

The Russian narrative was more directly shaped, introduced, and controlled by the Russian government than it was its counterpart in the West. The Yeltsin administration began disseminating this narrative during the campaign for the 1996 presidential election. The greater level of control that the Russian government had over the Russian media enabled it to have a higher degree of direct control over its narrative, better suppress potential counter-publics, and more broadly disseminate across society. Particularly, the reforms in media financing, which were part of the “shock therapy” reforms, enabled this control.<sup>22</sup>

In contrast, NATO’s stance and the development of its narrative towards Russia emerged from many more sources and were therefore much less the result of direct planning. Here it becomes clear again that NATO is not a single state like Russia, and thus NATO’s stance is always the result of the consensus of the individual stances of its member states. Additionally, the formation of the stances or narratives of these individual members will always be influenced by many more factors and was less influenced by the strategic planning factor, as in Russia. The reasons for this lie in the limited influence that western state leadership has on narrative-influencing factors such as the free press and civil society. As well as the factor that in Russia there is a much greater interest from the state leadership in having control over narratives, as this helps the much more central endeavor in Russia to maintain its own power.

Despite these differences, the process and use of these narratives are still comparable and represent the first step in the three-step development of narratives for both actors. The leadership of both actors began to influence these narratives as much as possible and then used them as justification for their political decisions. It can be stated that the first step is for the government of a state to begin implementing a narrative within society as a justification for its own actions and, consequently, for maintaining its own power. The government does not necessarily have to believe in this narrative itself; the political decisions it wants to make may have entirely different reasons than what they present to their people. The implemented narrative just represents the simplest and therefore most popular explanation of these decisions but does not necessarily reflect the true reason for the government’s decisions.

## **STEP 2: LEADERS BEGIN TO BELIEVE THEIR OWN NARRATIVES**

Over time, the creators of these narratives start to internalize and believe in the stories they have propagated. The repetition and reinforcement of these narratives, combined with the evolving geopolitical landscape, lead to a shift in perception among the leaders themselves. The government, which initially used the narrative only

**...NATO’s stance is always the result of the consensus of the individual stances of its member states.**

**In the case of the Russian anti-Western narrative, a critical factor was that NATO's actions provided evidence that reinforced the Russian government's narrative.**

as a strategic tool, begins to believe in it themselves. The reasons for this shift can be manifold. In democracies, the narrative might resonate so successfully with the population that the government cannot backtrack without jeopardizing its power, thereby being compelled to believe in it. In dictatorships, the suppression of counter-publics, the press, and academia can lead to a status where the narrative achieves absolute public-dominance. In the case of the Russian anti-Western narrative, a critical factor was that NATO's actions provided evidence that reinforced the Russian government's narrative.

The reasons why a government starts to believe its own narrative will be discussed in more detail later in this paper, using Russia as an example. For now, it is important to note that the second step in the three-step development of narratives involves the creators of the narrative beginning to believe in it themselves. It is crucial that these creators remain in their powerful positions within the state.

### **STEP 3: NARRATIVES SHAPE POLICY**

The final step occurs when these narratives begin to shape actual policy decisions and legislative actions. At this stage, the narratives become entrenched, guiding the strategic and tactical choices of the respective actor. The narrative is no longer merely the public justification for the government's actions but actively influences real policy decisions. The role of the narrative evolves. Initially, it serves merely as a public justification for the government's actions, but over time, it becomes a central factor influencing the government's decisions. This will be explained in more detail later, using the example of the Russian anti-Western narrative.

The term "ideological" is central here, describing the most significant change triggered by this three-step process. To understand this, it has to be clear that narratives are often highly ideological because these are easier to sell to the public than the strict, but complex rational explanations that the government originally had for their actions.

In the beginning of the process, the government holds a position of rationality in their approach to both domestic and foreign policy. However, leaders must sell their ideas and goals to the public, regardless of the state's form of governance, using ideological narratives to do so which serve as public justifications for their actions. But the resulting process, in which these narratives develop, ends with the government itself believing in them. This also changes government leaders' decision-making stances. Now the government believes in its own narrative—an ideological narrative—and this shifts the government's decision-making position from rational to ideological.

In the case of Russia-NATO relations, this point is particularly crucial. The end of the Cold War initially heralded the end of an era of ideologically driven foreign policy. The hope for a partnership with Russia was also the hope for finding a consensus on how to shape the world. However, because the opposing narratives on both sides convinced their own populations, and later their own governments, it caused the return of two opposing worldviews.

The hope for finding a consensus on how to shape the world died the moment the narratives on both sides became so strong that they mutually excluded each other. The two narratives began to oppose each other so fundamentally that a shared worldview became impossible without one side viewing its own narrative as false. Given the ideological nature of these narratives, this was nearly impossible without that side ceding their own power.

From this, one could argue that the way back to a partnership with Russia lies in returning to a state where both parties act from a position of rationality rather than ideology. This could be achieved by both sides acknowledging their narratives as false and returning to the state of the mid-1990s. It should be obvious that this is likely nothing more than a theoretical argument. But the notion that conflicts can become unsolvable due to the power of ideological narratives—and that a potential solution lies in returning to a state of rationality—should be noted.

It is also important to note that once the third step of the three-step narrative process has been embedded into governmental decisions, it becomes very difficult to find a way back from the respective narrative. Once a government begins to make ideological decisions based on a narrative, these decisions start to act as a safeguard for the continuation of the narrative. The more decisions and laws a state makes based on a particular narrative, the higher the price that must be paid to break away from that narrative. This applies both to the state or the people, in terms of reversing the consequences of the decisions, for example, in economic policy, and to the politicians themselves, who will find it increasingly difficult to justify their positions of power. This mechanism will become particularly evident in the later analysis of NATO-Russia relations, especially when considering the European, and specifically German, economic policies affected by this mechanism.

## **CONCLUSION**

The three-step narrative process, explaining how political narratives are initially crafted by leaders to influence public opinion and secure strategic gains. Narratives often start as tools for public justifications for their rational actions, without the genuine belief of their creators (the government). Over time, however, leaders

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begin to internalize these narratives, driven by factors such as their resonance with the public and external actions that appear to validate them. This internalization marks a shift from rational to ideological decision-making, where narratives become deeply embedded in policy decisions. As these narratives take root, reversing them becomes increasingly challenging. The decisions and laws based on these narratives act as safeguards, making it costly for states and politicians to abandon them.

In the following sections, we will examine how this process unfolded in Russia and NATO, identifying when each step occurred and the impact these steps had on the relationship between the two sides, both historically and in the present day.

## **1999/2000-2008: From Putin’s Rise to the Russo-Georgian War – The Reemergence of Russian Assertiveness**

**In December 1999, President Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned, appointing Vladimir Putin as acting president.**

At the turn of the millennium, Russia was undergoing significant political transformation. In December 1999, President Boris Yeltsin unexpectedly resigned, appointing Vladimir Putin as acting president. This marked the beginning of Putin’s long-term dominance in Russian politics. Upon officially taking office in 2000, Putin initiated a series of reforms aimed at centralizing power and stabilizing the nation, as a reaction to the domestic situation in which Russia found itself since the “shock-therapy” reforms. The view of Putin at the beginning of his tenure provides a clear picture of how Russia stepped onto the stage of the 21st century. Western analysts considered Putin “the ordinary” and the new leader of Russia reflected the country’s new position in their eyes—a position of a normal state, not a great power.<sup>23</sup>

However, a closer look reveals that Putin also embodied the restructuring of power within the Russian state. On one hand, he was a former KGB agent, a remnant of the Soviet Union, demonstrating that aspects of Soviet ideology had survived the 1990s. On the other hand, his power was already strongly based on the support by the oligarchic circles in Russia, a condition that would only grow stronger from his inauguration to the present day. The person of Putin illustrated how power was distributed in Russia at that time and which political currents held significant influence. However,



the Western reaction to him also showed the weak position Russia occupied in international relations, at the start of his tenure.

Putin's early years were characterized by efforts to consolidate federal authority, gaining further control over the oligarchs, and restoring Russia's global standing. He leveraged state-controlled media to build public support and diminish opposition. The Chechen Wars were a significant factor during this period, used by Putin to rally nationalistic sentiment and justify increased security measures. The political landscape became increasingly authoritarian as Putin's administration curtailed freedoms of the press and civil society, setting the stage for a highly controlled political environment that prioritized state stability over democratic reform.<sup>24</sup> This was the groundwork for the further spreading of the Anti-west Narrative in the coming years, by making the public opinion even more singular. Putin's overarching goal during this period was to restore Russia to a position where it can take relevant action on the global stage. The 1990s had shown that NATO made its decisions almost independently of Russian protest or approval. This state of affairs was a thorn in Putin's side, fundamentally contradicting his view of Russia's role in the world, especially in Europe. Since the reasons for this weak position lay in Russia's domestic political situation, Putin's early years were particularly marked by efforts to change this.

Simultaneously, NATO was navigating its post-Cold War identity and strategic direction. The alliance, which had expanded in 1999 to include Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, was focused on integrating these new members and addressing security challenges in the post-Soviet space. This expansion was part of NATO's broader strategy to stabilize Eastern Europe and promote democratic governance and market economies. A strategy that further expanded its dominant position in Europe. The attacks of September 11 fundamentally changed NATO; they were the unintended answer to the question of what NATO's new identity and mission would be. The war on terror began, shifting NATO's priorities.<sup>25</sup> The fight against international terrorism became the focus of NATO's attention, which can be cited as another factor regarding why NATO recognized its narrative of arrogance and naivety towards Russia far too late.

Based on this narrative, NATO carried out its next expansion in Eastern Europe in 2004, an expansion that once again crossed another red line for the Kremlin by incorporating former Soviet republics into NATO and creating direct borders between NATO and Russia.<sup>26</sup> This was the final major piece of evidence that convinced the Russian leadership of their own "NATO is a threat to Russia" narrative. What had begun as Yeltsin's campaign strategy in 1996 had

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**This narrative in Russia now assumed that the West had intentionally excluded them from the new order of Europe...**

become the ideological guiding principle of Putin's administration. However, the Russia in which this narrative now spread extensively was no longer the same Russia in which it was reborn under Yeltsin.

Putin had put Russia back on the path to operational capability on the international stage, boosted its GDP, returned it to the top 10 largest economies in the world, and especially revitalized its military-industrial complex. NATO's final confirmation of the Russian narrative came at a time when Russia was shedding its status as a "has-been power" and returning to the table of great powers. And this resurgence was led by a president who had now also come to believe in the anti-Western narrative.

This narrative in Russia now assumed that the West had intentionally excluded them from the new order of Europe after the end of the Cold War while simultaneously (and successfully) attempting to bring Moscow's former allies to their side. Russia had envisioned itself as a partner of Europe, never truly interested in becoming a part of the EU or NATO, but rather as a strong yet independent partner. The PFP and Yeltsin's understanding of it, and the Russian understanding of the NRC as a NATO Alternative, reflected this view of Russia's desired place in Europe at the beginning of the 1990s up until the early 2000s.<sup>27</sup> However, Russia now felt deliberately excluded from this new European order and saw itself confronted by a larger, more powerful NATO that had come even closer. It perceived NATO as an offensive threat to the stability within its own country, stability that had only recently been restored under Putin. Moreover, it blamed NATO for the failure of the reforms and the catastrophic internal political situation in the 1990s.

This became even more critical because Putin had also succeeded in giving the Russian leadership much more direct control over the media, and thus over the spread of the anti-West narrative. They cultivated this narrative through various means, including state-controlled media, political reforms, and public speeches. Putin's administration took control of major television networks, ensuring that the media echoed the government's message. This allowed the Kremlin to shape public perception, towards the anti-West narrative, which in the eyes of the Kremlin, NATO had given the final proof with its 2004 enlargement.

Before we take a look at the beginning of the third step of the narrative three-step in Russia, which starts with Putin's speech at the NATO summit in 2008, it is essential to understand why the democratization of Eastern European countries was so critical to Moscow. This understanding will make Russia's actions following the Color Revolutions comprehensible, provide a realistic perspective to the narrative-driven explanatory approach of this paper, and further

clarify that the primary goal of Russia's leadership is to secure its own hold on power.

The early 2000s were marked by the Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, which had a profound impact on Russia's perception of its own security and influence. The Rose Revolution in Georgia (2003), the Orange Revolution in Ukraine (2004), and the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan (2005) were significant democratic movements that led to regime changes in these former Soviet states.

Russia drew two clear conclusions from these developments. First, they perceived it as a threat to Russia and the power of the Russian government, and second, they saw these developments as orchestrated by the West. To understand why this was seen as a threat from the Russian perspective, one must understand the Russian concept of danger. As previously explained, the Russian population always seeks stability and is willing to sacrifice democratic and living standards for it. This priority for stability is rooted in Russia's history of repeated invasions by other countries and internal crises. An expression of this quest for stability is a preference for strong leaders at the top of the country. A ruler in Russia is not measured by whether he is democratic or economically successful, but by whether they create stability. The economic successes of Putin in the early 2000s were not the actual reason why he was able to remain in power so successfully. These economic successes brought stability to the country and made Putin appear as a strong leader who could ensure this long-term stability, which made him successful. As also previously explained, the government's top priority is to keep itself in power. These two facts ensure that a successful Russian government must always present itself as strong, and a successful Russian leader must always present himself as a strong leader to ensure their goal of maintaining power.

The Color Revolutions now threatened this path to power as well as the power of the government itself. A successful Color Revolution was always marked by a departure from authoritarian leadership styles, a boost in democratic reforms, and a turn towards the West. The problem for the Kremlin was that every successful Color Revolution provided its own population with an example that there was another path for former USSR states besides the one taken by the Russian leadership. A path that offered integration into the new structure of Europe and potentially a long-term perspective on joining the EU and NATO. A path that was able to combine the seeking for stability with democratic standards and reforms. In short, the Color Revolutions were a threat to the Russian leadership because they potentially questioned the foundation of their power.

Moreover, they further confirmed the Russian narrative of the West as an offensive threat to Russia. The Russian leadership

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**Russia's understanding is that any action by NATO that could potentially undermine or threaten Russia's internal stability is a threat to the country.**

viewed these revolutions not just as spontaneous uprisings but as orchestrated by Western powers to weaken Russia's influence in its near abroad, and therefore an attack on the stability of Russia itself. This perception was bolstered by the fact that many of the leaders and organizations involved in the Color Revolutions received support from Western NGOs and governments.<sup>28</sup>

Here again, the differences of the two actors, about their understanding what threat to their own country is, become clear. Russia's understanding is that any action by NATO that could potentially undermine or threaten Russia's internal stability is a threat to the country. A threat which, given that they assume the West would share or at least understand this view, was carried out quite deliberately by the West, thus making NATO an offensive threat to Russia.

NATO, on the other hand, saw the aggressive Russian rhetoric and their actions as part of their negotiation strategy, not as ideologically motivated. They understood that the Kremlin wanted to limit the spread of pro-Western revolutions but did not understand the true reasons for this. The West assumed it was a foreign policy issue for Russia and an attempt to maintain its power in the region. In truth, however, Russia understood the color revolutions as an attack on its internal stability.

This understanding of what happened in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan forced the Russian leadership to react harshly. From their perspective, it was inevitable to show a tough, aggressive response to counter the threat while simultaneously presenting their own position of strength to the Russian people to secure their own power. The strict belief in the anti-Western narrative, both among the Russian people and in the Russian government, made it even more necessary to react harshly and confrontationally. After all, one could not approach the actor which, according to one's own deepest conviction, was the greatest threat to the stability of one's own country. From a Russian perspective, harsh reactions were therefore realistic. The belief in the anti-Western narrative was so firmly anchored and directly linked to the government's retention of power that acting based on the narrative was now rational and no longer ideological.

In the mid-2000s, discussions about Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO intensified, reflecting these countries' aspirations to integrate more closely with Western institutions. Russia saw the push for NATO membership by these nations as a continuation of the democratization process initiated by the Color Revolutions, and therefore again as a threat to its own stability. For Georgia, the Rose Revolution of 2003 had set the country on a pro-Western trajectory, culminating in President Mikheil Saakashvili's strong advocacy for

NATO membership. Similarly, in Ukraine, the Orange Revolution of 2004 brought to power a government that sought to move the country closer to the West and away from Russian influence.

At the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008, the topic of NATO expansion to include Georgia and Ukraine was a central issue. Although NATO did not extend an official Membership Action Plan (MAP) to either country, the summit's declaration stated that "these countries will become members of NATO. This assurance was significant, even if it stopped short of immediate membership, and was seen as a clear signal of NATO's support for these countries' aspirations."<sup>29</sup>

Russia's response to these developments was swift and unequivocal. President Vladimir Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 had already outlined Russia's staunch opposition to NATO's eastward expansion. In his speech, Putin criticized NATO for moving its borders closer to Russia, describing this as a provocative act that ignored Russia's security concerns. He argued that NATO's actions were part of a broader strategy to contain Russia and undermine its influence in the post-Soviet space.<sup>30</sup> The speech was nothing less than the public declaration of the Russian understanding of threats, as well as the revelation that Putin himself was deeply convinced of the Russian anti-Western narrative.

The 2008 NATO summit's declaration regarding Georgia and Ukraine only heightened these tensions. Russia viewed the potential NATO membership of these countries as an existential threat. The Russian understanding of NATO as an offensive threat to them made this potential NATO expansion not just a geopolitical maneuver but an ideological and security threat to Russia's stability. The Russian leadership, therefore, saw a need to act decisively to prevent these countries from moving further into the Western sphere of influence. Once again, it becomes clear how the deep anti-Western narrative turns ideological decisions into supposedly rational ones, a clear indication that the Russian leadership was about to embark on the third step of the narrative three-step.

The situation reached a boiling point in August 2008 when tensions between Russia and Georgia erupted into a full-scale conflict. The immediate cause of the war was Georgia's military operation to reclaim the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In response, Russia launched a large-scale military intervention, quickly overwhelming Georgian forces and solidifying its control over the contested regions.<sup>31</sup> The war lasted only five days, but its implications were profound.

The 2008 Russo-Georgian War was a clear manifestation of the third step in Russia's narrative development—from a government that started believing its own narrative to this government started

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making their policy decisions based on this narrative. In this case, it was the shift from rhetorical opposition to concrete military action. It demonstrated Russia’s willingness to use force to protect its interests and assert its dominance in its near abroad. The conflict also served as a stark warning to other former Soviet republics about the potential consequences of pursuing closer ties with NATO. It was the clearest proof so far of what a threat these steps to the West represented, in Russia’s view, to their internal stability.

However, this military action by Russia also made another point clear: the era of Russia as a “has-been power” was over. Putin had managed to bring his country back to a position of active operational capability. Russia was able again to influence NATO’s decisions.

This and NATO’s understanding of the events in Georgia and Putin’s 2007 Munich speech reflected a significant shift in the alliance’s perception of Russia. The alliance began to realize that its naive attitude towards Russia from the 1990s was definitely over. Moreover, NATO had to acknowledge that its arrogant disregard for Russian views on national security had consequences—consequences it would now have to face, given that Russia was once again capable of backing its statements with actions. The alliance recognized the need to strengthen its collective defense and to support Eastern European countries more robustly against potential Russian aggression. This reassessment is reflected in various NATO policy documents and statements from that period, emphasizing the importance of deterrence and defense in response to Russia’s actions.<sup>32</sup> These changes in NATO’s understanding and approach fundamentally altered the nature of the NATO-Russia relations. Previously, one could argue that at least one side, NATO, was still interested in a joint partnership. Although this perspective could have been considered naive for some time. Now both sides were convinced that the other side posed an existential threat to their own interests (in the case of NATO) or even their very existence (in the case of Russia). Both sides once again recognized each other as enemies, laying the groundwork for a return to the conditions of the Cold War.

### **NATO’S ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS DURING THE 2000s**

One part of the development of NATO-Russia relations during this period, which often receives too little attention, especially from the Russian side, as it represents a strong counterargument to the narrative that NATO is an offensive enemy of Russia, is the ongoing effort to transfer NATO-Russia relations into an institutional framework. It is an attempt that also increases the intensity of the relationship and secures it in the long term. Even as the ideological divide between NATO and Russia deepened, NATO persistently

sought to engage Russia through a series of initiatives aimed at fostering cooperation and building trust. These efforts underscore the extent to which NATO was committed to integrating Russia into the Euro-Atlantic security framework, reflecting a vision of Europe where Russia was a partner rather than an adversary.

One of the cornerstone efforts in this regard was the NATO-Russia Founding Act of 1997. This agreement was a significant diplomatic achievement, laying the groundwork for a cooperative relationship based on mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity. The Founding Act established the Permanent Joint Council (PJC), which provided a formal mechanism for consultation and cooperation on security issues. Operating until 2002, the PJC allowed NATO and Russia to engage in regular dialogue, ostensibly bridging the gap between the two actors' security concerns.<sup>33</sup> In parallel, NATO and Russia undertook Joint Military Exercises and Operations, which were intended to enhance mutual trust and operational compatibility. These exercises, including collaborative peacekeeping missions in the Balkans, were practical expressions of NATO's commitment to building a working relationship with Russia. They served not only as confidence-building measures but also as tangible demonstrations of NATO's desire to work alongside Russia in stabilizing Europe, thereby refuting the emerging narrative within Russia that NATO was an existential threat.<sup>34</sup> The establishment of the NATO-Russia Council (NRC) in 2002 marked a further evolution in the relationship. Replacing the PJC, the NRC was designed as a forum for equal partnership, where NATO and Russia could address a wide array of security challenges together. The Council facilitated discussions on issues such as counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and crisis management, reinforcing NATO's strategy of engaging Russia as a constructive partner in maintaining European and global security.<sup>35</sup>

However, despite these robust efforts from NATO, the relationship increasingly soured. As outlined earlier, Putin's administration, deeply entrenched in the anti-Western narrative, viewed these initiatives with growing suspicion. What NATO intended as sincere attempts to build a cooperative framework, the Kremlin interpreted as strategic encroachments designed to weaken Russia's influence and security. The very efforts that were meant to foster trust and collaboration were thus perceived by the Russian leadership as proof of NATO's duplicity.

This misalignment between NATO's intentions and Russia's perceptions was a critical factor in the gradual deterioration of relations. While NATO remained committed to the principles of cooperation and partnership, Russia's deepening conviction in the narrative of Western hostility rendered these initiatives increasingly

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**...NATO may have been naive in underestimating the depth of Russia's suspicions, it was not for lack of attempting to build a partnership.**

futile. By the mid-2000s, the atmosphere of cautious optimism that had characterized the early post-Cold War years had given way to a stark and growing antagonism.

These efforts by NATO, though significant, ultimately failed to stem the tide of suspicion and hostility emanating from Moscow. Instead, they underscore the tragic irony of NATO's approach: that despite substantial and sustained engagement, the growing rift between NATO and Russia became insurmountable. This pattern reinforces the argument that while NATO may have been naive in underestimating the depth of Russia's suspicions, it was not for lack of attempting to build a partnership.

### **CONCLUSION**

The period from 1999/2000 to 2008 marked a changeful phase in the evolution of NATO-Russia relations, characterized by a deepening ideological divide and the re-emergence of adversarial stances reminiscent of the Cold War. Under Vladimir Putin's leadership, Russia underwent significant political and economic transformation, reasserting its capacity to act on the global stage and adopting an increasingly confrontational approach towards NATO. This shift was driven by a combination of domestic consolidation of power and the now general spread of the anti-Western narrative, in government and society, that framed NATO's actions as existential threats to Russian stability. Even the efforts to promote cooperation through the establishment of joint institutions and extended (military) cooperation could not prevent this. In the end, the belief and fear of NATO as an offensive threat, for Russia's national security, was stronger than the belief that these efforts would seriously form the basis of a secure partnership.

NATO, on the other hand, continued its post-Cold War expansion, integrating new members and focusing on new security challenges such as international terrorism. The alliance's actions, particularly the 2004 expansion into Eastern Europe, were perceived by Russia as aggressive encroachments on its sphere of influence, reinforcing the Kremlin's narrative of Western hostility.

The Color Revolutions in Eastern Europe and Central Asia further exacerbated these tensions, as Russia viewed these democratic movements as orchestrated by the West to undermine its influence. The culmination of these developments was vividly demonstrated in Putin's 2007 Munich speech and the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, both of which highlighted Russia's readiness to use force to protect its perceived interests and assert its power and marked the beginning of the third step of the three-step narrative in the Russian government.

NATO's reassessment of its approach towards Russia, prompted by these events, led to a more robust stance on collective defense



and support for Eastern European countries. The realization that its earlier, naive attitude towards Russia was no longer tenable marked a significant shift in the alliance's perception and strategy.

In summary, the decade leading up to the Munich NATO Summit in 2008 set the stage for a renewed period of confrontation between NATO and Russia. The deep ideological divides and contrasting perceptions of security and stability underscored the challenges of achieving a stable and cooperative relationship. As both sides increasingly viewed each other as existential threats, the groundwork was laid for a return to Cold War-era tensions, making the future of NATO-Russia relations fraught with uncertainty and potential conflict.

## **2008-2014: Ukraine and the Evolving Dynamics – From Diplomatic Thaw to Renewed Confrontation**

### **THE MEDVEDEV PRESIDENCY (2008-2012)**

The presidency of Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012) represents a brief period of relative thaw in Russia's otherwise confrontational relationship with the West. Medvedev, seen by many as a more liberal and Western-friendly figure compared to his predecessor and successor, Vladimir Putin, sought to modernize Russia and engage more constructively with international partners. This era is often characterized by a short-lived improvement in relations between Russia and the West, most notably through the "reset" policy initiated by the Obama administration.

Medvedev prioritized economic modernization and innovation, seeking to reduce Russia's dependency on oil and gas exports. Initiatives like the Skolkovo Innovation Center were launched to foster high-tech industries and attract foreign investment. Domestically, Medvedev promoted a series of legal reforms aimed at combating corruption and improving the rule of law. However, these reforms had limited impact, and many critics argue that they were more about creating a favorable image than implementing substantial changes.<sup>36</sup>

The "reset" policy, aimed at improving U.S.-Russia relations, was a significant diplomatic effort during Medvedev's presidency. The policy led to several key agreements, including the New START

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partners.**

treaty, which reduced the number of nuclear weapons held by both countries. This period also saw increased cooperation on issues such as counterterrorism and the Iranian nuclear program.

Despite these efforts, Medvedev's presidency had little long-term impact on the overall trend towards confrontation between Russia and the West. The deep-seated belief in the anti-Western narrative within Russian society and key government circles remained largely unchanged. This narrative, which portrays the West as a fundamental threat to Russia's sovereignty and stability, continued to influence Russian politics and foreign policy. Many of the individuals who held significant power during Putin's earlier presidency and who were deeply entrenched in this anti-Western worldview remained influential during Medvedev's tenure. These individuals, often part of Putin's inner circle, were poised to reclaim their dominant roles upon his return to the presidency.

**Despite the initial optimism, Medvedev's tenure did not bring about significant structural changes in Russia's political system. The real power remained with Vladimir Putin...**

Despite the initial optimism, Medvedev's tenure did not bring about significant structural changes in Russia's political system. The real power remained with Vladimir Putin, who served as Prime Minister during Medvedev's presidency. In 2012, Putin returned to the presidency, marking the end of Medvedev's liberalization efforts and a shift back to more authoritarian and confrontational policies. Putin's return was accompanied by a series of measures to consolidate power and crack down on political dissent. This period saw increased state control over the media, tighter restrictions on civil society, and a more assertive foreign policy aimed at reasserting Russia's influence in its near abroad and countering perceived threats from NATO and the West. Putin used these threats from the West to portray himself once again as a strong leader who could bring stability, thereby providing a legitimate basis for his return to power.

The Medvedev presidency was a brief interlude in Russia's otherwise adversarial stance towards the West. While it offered a temporary improvement in relations and initiated several modernization efforts, it ultimately failed to bring about lasting change. The return of Vladimir Putin to the presidency in 2012 marked a decisive end to this period of cautious optimism and set the stage for a return to more aggressive and confrontational policies, culminating in the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas.<sup>37</sup>

This period highlights the inherent instability in Russia's political system and its foreign policy, where temporary shifts towards liberalization and cooperation are often followed by reassertions of authoritarian control and aggressive geopolitics. The reason for this can once again be found in the influence of anti-Western narratives in Russia. The exchange from Putin to Medvedev was merely a change at the top of the Russian state and government. Large parts

of the ruling elite remained in place or in other influential positions, and with them, the narrative of the aggressive West and the Russian perception of threats against the state survived. So, when Putin returned to the presidency, it was as if a waiting, ready body had just had its head reattached. Consequently, Russia's confrontational stance returned.

Medvedev's era put NATO in a dilemma. On one hand, Medvedev was the president during the Georgian War; on the other hand, he was seen by the West as providing the chance to finally realize at least parts of the hopes of the 1990s. The Obama administration's "reset" policy tried to highlight and build Medvedev's liberalization efforts. But the war in Georgia demonstrated how Russia used its regained ability to act in an offensively threatening manner. This resulted in NATO's policy towards Russia being inconsistent. While it was clear to Putin and his leadership circle that once they were back in power, the brief thaw in relations with the West would be over, it took the West too long to realize this, time that could not be used to develop and present a unified and coherent strategy against Russia's aggressions.

Furthermore, it once again became evident that Russia had regained its ability to act on the international stage during this period. The brief thawing and subsequent rapid re-freezing of NATO-Russia relations during this time largely depended on the political decisions of the Kremlin, a clear sign that Russia was back in the position of an active player.

## **CRIMEA**

Shortly after Putin's return to the presidency, Russia's attention turned almost entirely towards Ukraine. It was the final implementation of the third step in the narrative evolution by the Russian leadership. The events in Ukraine at that time once again confirmed their narrative of the aggressive West, and from their perspective, put them in a position where action was unavoidable. The potential shift of Ukraine away from Russia and the possibility that it could become an active part of the Western security architecture were seen as an active threat to Russia's stability.

The roots of the Crimea crisis can be traced back to the early 2000s, with the resurgence of Russian nationalism and the strategic importance of Crimea itself. Crimea, historically part of Russia until it was transferred to Ukraine in 1954, houses the strategically vital Black Sea Fleet based in Sevastopol. This naval base represents a critical component of Russia's military infrastructure and its access to the Mediterranean. In the years leading up to the annexation, Ukraine's political landscape was marked by significant turmoil, highlighted by the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Euromaidan

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protests in 2013-2014. The latter movement led to the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovich, a pro-Russian leader, which was perceived by Moscow as a direct threat to its influence in the region.<sup>38</sup>

Russia's military strategy for the annexation of Crimea was characterized by rapid and covert operations, reflecting a sophisticated understanding of hybrid warfare. According to the document "Russia's Military Operation in Crimea: Road Testing Rapid Reaction Capabilities," the Russian military employed "little green men"—soldiers without insignia—to seize key infrastructure and military sites across Crimea. This approach minimized the immediate confrontation and confusion among Ukrainian forces and the international community.<sup>39</sup>

The operation was meticulously planned and executed. Russian forces quickly established control over the Crimean Parliament, enabling the installation of a pro-Russian government which then called for a referendum on joining Russia. The referendum, held on March 16, 2014, resulted in an overwhelming vote in favor of joining Russia, although it was widely criticized and not recognized by the international community.

Russia justified its actions by invoking the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian speakers in Crimea, claiming that they were under threat from the new Ukrainian government. This narrative was propagated through Russian state-controlled media, which played a crucial role in shaping public perception both domestically and internationally.

The situation in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine further escalated the conflict between Russia and Ukraine. Following the annexation of Crimea, pro-Russian separatists in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions declared independence from Ukraine, leading to a violent internal conflict. Russia's support for these separatists, through both covert military assistance and political backing, intensified the hostilities. The Ukrainian government launched military operations to reclaim the territory, resulting in significant casualties and displacement. Despite numerous attempts at ceasefire agreements, the conflict in the Donbas persisted, highlighting the deep divisions within Ukraine and the geopolitical tensions between Russia and the West. The war in Donbas, much like the annexation of Crimea, was underpinned by narratives of protecting ethnic Russians and combating alleged Ukrainian nationalism, further solidifying the anti-Western narrative within Russia and justifying its aggressive stance. Thus, the entire operation in Crimea and Donbas can be seen as a measure to ensure Russian influence in the region.<sup>40</sup>

The international response was swift and condemnatory. The United States and European Union imposed sanctions on Russia,

targeting key individuals and sectors of the Russian economy. NATO also increased its military presence in Eastern Europe as a deterrence measure, reinforcing its commitment to the security of member states bordering Russia. However, NATO's reaction was by no means as united as one might have assumed, a fact that would become even more apparent in the following years. The United States and Europe chose different approaches in their Russia policies. While it was evident that they followed a fundamentally similar strategy, the unique relationships between individual states and Russia led to different interpretations of the same strategy.

While the United States took a more aggressive stance, including the withdrawal from various arms reduction treaties,<sup>41</sup> European countries, notably Germany, were more inclined towards diplomatic and economic engagement, partly due to their significant energy dependence on Russia. On the other hand, Europe's reliance on Russian natural resources, particularly natural gas, has played a significant role in shaping the continent's response to Russia's aggressive actions. By 2020, Europe imported about 36 percent of its total gas demand from Russia, amounting to approximately 185 billion cubic meters of gas. This dependence has its roots in the declining natural gas production within Europe, coupled with insufficient alternative supply sources to meet growing demands. The Netherlands, Norway, and the United Kingdom, once significant producers, have seen their outputs diminish, further deepening Europe's reliance on Russian gas. This dependency has influenced European foreign policy and its approach to sanctions. For instance, despite recognizing the geopolitical risks, European countries have often been hesitant to impose severe sanctions on Russia that could jeopardize their energy security. This was evident after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, where the European response included limited sanctions that targeted specific individuals and sectors rather than a comprehensive embargo on Russian energy exports.<sup>42</sup>

The Minsk agreements, Minsk I and Minsk II, further underscore this divergence in how Europe and the United States approached Russia's aggression. Minsk I, signed in September 2014, and Minsk II, signed in February 2015, were primarily European-led diplomatic efforts aimed at de-escalating the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. These agreements, facilitated by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and involving France and Germany in the Normandy Format, were seen by many as attempts to appease Russia through negotiation and compromise. While the agreements included ceasefires, withdrawal of heavy weapons, and constitutional reforms in Ukraine to grant more autonomy to the separatist regions, they ultimately failed to achieve a lasting peace.<sup>43</sup>

The Minsk agreements highlighted Europe's preference for

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diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution over more punitive measures, a strategy that can once again be traced back to their economic dependence on Russia. The Minsk Agreements stood in stark contrast to the reaction of the U.S. The relatively lenient nature of the agreements, which lacked robust enforcement mechanisms, allowed Russia to exploit the situation, undermining the ceasefires and continuing its support for separatist forces. This emboldened Russia, reinforcing its belief that it could pursue aggressive policies with limited repercussions from Europe, which was keen to avoid a full-scale confrontation.<sup>44</sup> It also showed Russia that its return to a position of strength and capability to act had now been acknowledged, at least in parts of the West. Furthermore, this was another opportunity for Putin and the Russian leadership to present themselves as strong and therefore, legitimate to the Russian population. It demonstrated that their efforts to restore Russia to the position it held before the, in their view, humiliating 1990s were paying off.

Overall, the inconsistent and sometimes fragmented NATO policies, coupled with Europe's energy dependence on Russia, inadvertently encouraged further Russian aggression. The annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas were clear examples where Russia acted with the understanding that it could manage the international backlash due to the strategic and economic considerations of NATO member states.

In summary, the period following the annexation of Crimea highlighted significant challenges within NATO to forming a cohesive strategy towards Russia. Europe's energy dependence and the differing threat perceptions and policy priorities between the United States and European nations contributed to a complex and often inconsistent approach. This environment allowed Russia to continue its aggressive policies with relatively manageable consequences, further solidifying the anti-Western narrative within Russian leadership and society.

# **2014-2022: The Ukraine Invasion – The Final Break in NATO-Russia Relations**

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 brought the failure of NATO-Russia relations back into the public spotlight. It marks the nadir in the relations between the two actors and serves as the definitive proof of the failure of this relationship since the end of the Cold War. From the perspective of analyzing these relations, this war offers little new insight. The complete standstill in relations means that there can be no new developments or improvements in the relations between the two actors until the end of the war.

What can be noted is the impact this war had on the narratives and security concepts of both sides. In the West, the outbreak of the war marked the final end of the last remaining hopes for a partnership with Russia. It was the end of naive, wishful thinking, especially among NATO's European partners, and their hopes that Russia would eventually turn to the West. The course that NATO subsequently chose—full support for Ukraine on all levels—had no direct impact on relations with Russia. Relations had reached rock bottom with the start of the invasion, and solidarity and support for Ukraine only ensured that they remained at these zero points.

From a Russian perspective, the invasion of Ukraine can be seen as the ultimate implementation of political and military decisions based on the anti-Western narrative. From a Western point of view, the invasion may have had little or no rational basis; a genuine understanding of why Russia decided to take this step can only be gained by considering the firm belief in this narrative.

Furthermore, the war and the way NATO supported Ukraine provided further evidence for the narrative itself. The Russian government now had the opportunity to frame the narrative more sharply and aggressively, as they portrayed NATO as an active party in the war, essentially making the conflict a direct war against NATO. The West transitioned from a potential threat to Russia's security to an active threat with which it was at war. Predictions became reality. This is advantageous for the Russian leadership for several reasons. Firstly, it strengthens and legitimizes their power by confirming their predictions about the West and thus validating them as the legitimate strong leaders of Russia. Secondly, this sharper narrative, with the West as an active threat, also means that more radical measures can be taken with less opposition to fear, as the

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threat to Russia has become actively existential. Therefore, it helps the Russian leadership achieve their ultimate goal—maintaining their own power—by confirming their narrative/ideological power base and providing them with more room for maneuver.

It can be concluded that the war in Ukraine is not more than the absolute end of already existing trends for NATO-Russia relations. It did not bring a new level to this relationship but rather ended it. For answering the question, “Why did NATO’s Russia policy approach fail after the end of the Cold War?” The war in Ukraine is not part of the answer but merely the sad proof of the question itself.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between NATO and Russia has been marked by deep-seated tensions and contrasting perspectives since the end of the Cold War. This chapter provides a brief summary of the described central events of this relation, leading to an analysis of whether the conflict could have been avoided and what alternative actions could have been taken by NATO, if there ever were any.

The relationship between NATO and Russia has evolved through a series of pivotal events and ideological clashes. The fundamental differences between the two actors are rooted in their history, population characteristics, geographical factors, and national self-images, with Russia prioritizing stability over democracy and exhibiting a cultural acceptance of disorder. As well as the fact that we are discussing the relationship between a state actor and a non-state actor. The 1990s saw significant shifts in the balance of power, with NATO’s growing influence and Russia’s internal struggles leading to a resurgence of anti-Western narratives. Despite initial cooperation through initiatives like the PFP, differing interpretations and subsequent NATO expansions strained relations. Under Putin, Russia regained its global capacity to act, and NATO’s continued expansion, particularly in 2004, further fueled Russia’s anti-Western narrative. The 2008 Russo-Georgian War marked the beginning of Russia’s policy decisions based on the anti-Western narrative, which had started in the 1990s. A narrative which since then had only become stronger and gained direct influence over Russian policy decisions. Medvedev’s presidency offered a brief thaw in relations, but Putin’s return and the annexation of Crimea in 2014 highlighted deep-seated anti-Western sentiment. The invasion of Ukraine in 2022 solidified this narrative and marked the nadir of NATO-Russia relations, demonstrating the failure of NATO’s approach.

Understanding the Russian perspective requires recognizing the deep-seated belief in the anti-Western narrative. For Russia, actions



perceived as ideological by the West are rational decisions driven by this narrative. This “ideologically driven realism” means that what the West sees as ideological behavior, Russia views as pragmatic responses to perceived threats for its national security and stability. The belief in this narrative is so ingrained that it shapes Russia’s national security policy and its interactions with NATO.

The ideological foundation of Russia’s actions, when viewed through the lens of this narrative, reveals a form of realism that is fundamentally different from Western perspectives. Russia’s actions are rational within the context of their historical experiences and the continuous threat perception shaped by the anti-Western narrative. The West often fails to understand this because it does not fully appreciate the historical and cultural factors driving Russian policy, and never made and still isn’t making enough efforts understanding it on a deep enough level.

This failure to understand Russia’s security perspective has been a significant shortcoming in NATO’s approach. Russia perceives NATO’s actions, such as its expansion and military exercises, as direct threats to its stability and sovereignty. This perception is rooted in historical experiences where Russia has faced invasions and existential threats, reinforcing a national psyche that prioritizes security over democratic ideas and reforms.

To comprehend what is rational for Russia, one must consider this deep-seated sense of vulnerability and the narrative that frames the West as a perennial threat. NATO’s actions, viewed through this lens, are seen as part of a strategy to encircle and weaken Russia. This perspective is not just held by the Kremlin but is widely accepted within Russian society, making it a powerful driver of national policy. Understanding this would have been the basis for better cooperation after the end of the Cold War, whereby understanding in this case does not mean sharing or agreeing with the views, but only understanding their substantive logic in order to make one’s own decisions more informed.

But just as NATO failed to understand Russia’s security perspective, Russia never made a genuine effort to understand NATO’s concerns. From Russia’s viewpoint, NATO’s expansion and military activities were seen as offensive and invasive. This misunderstanding is rooted in the contrasting worldviews of the two actors. Russia’s historical experiences and strategic culture make it perceive any Western military presence near its borders as a direct threat.

Russia’s actions, driven by the anti-Western narrative, have often been interpreted by NATO as aggressive and unjustified. However, from Russia’s perspective, these actions are defensive measures necessary to protect its sovereignty and stability. This mutual lack

**But just as NATO failed to understand Russia’s security perspective, Russia never made a genuine effort to understand NATO’s concerns.**

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of understanding has contributed significantly to the deterioration of relations and the escalation of conflicts.

Understanding these two contrasting perspectives on the events and the relationship after the Cold War inevitably raises a question: could this conflict have been avoided at all? The reasons and mechanisms for Russia's actions have been extensively discussed here. But could NATO have reacted differently at any point since the end of the Cold War?

If you ask the Russian leadership, the answer is clear: NATO's aggressive expansion policy is to blame for the current situation.

What can be clearly stated is that more effort should have been put into understanding the Russian security perspective. Particularly at the end of the 1990s, when NATO regarded Russia as a "has-been power," there should have been more focus on this. However, even if one assumes that NATO had done so, it is difficult to derive from this whether there would have been a truly feasible alternative scenario. Two potential paths can be outlined that NATO could have attempted. Firstly, it can be argued that an earlier and deeper understanding of the Russian security perspective should have led NATO to choose a path with more appeasement and a more Russia-oriented approach. This approach would involve significant diplomatic efforts to include Russia in the European security framework, perhaps through more robust engagement in the Partnership for Peace or other cooperative initiatives. It would have been a way to address Russia's security needs. But this idea overlooks three central aspects.

Firstly, the Russian anti-Western narrative was already strengthening in the 1990s, even before NATO had expanded. Thus, it can be said that the influence of this narrative would have grown over the years regardless, bringing back the belief in Russia that NATO was an enemy. Once this belief had taken hold, the Russian leadership, for reasons of maintaining their own power, would have been forced to act accordingly.

Secondly, such diplomatic efforts from NATO did indeed exist over many years, including the Partnership for Peace, the NATO-Russia Founding Act, and the NATO-Russia Council. Yet, all these efforts could not prevent the deterioration of relations, suggesting that such mechanisms could never fundamentally change the differing views on security and national security that Russia and NATO have.

Lastly, the path of increased appeasement by NATO would also have meant granting an undemocratic and externally aggressive state the leading determination over the post-Cold War order of Europe. NATO would have adapted to the visions of a country primarily focused on regaining its great power status in Europe and seeking to keep its neighboring countries under direct, undemocratic control. It

can thus be said that a necessary higher understanding on NATO's part of Russia's security interests would not have led to more appeasement policies from NATO.

While it might have temporarily eased tensions with Russia, the anti-Western narrative and Russia's understanding of what threatens its country would have eventually led to a confrontational policy toward NATO. The only difference would have been that the more the West and NATO held back, the worse their position would have been in the eventual (direct or indirect) confrontation with Russia.

The second path that NATO could have chosen, after gaining a deeper understanding of Russia's security interests, would have been the complete opposite approach to the one just described. Here, it would be argued that the differences in understanding what threatens the security and stability of a country and how the new order of Europe should look after the Cold War are so fundamentally different in Russia and NATO that they would inevitably lead to renewed confrontations in the long term. From this very realism-driven argument, one could even formulate the directive to NATO that it should have exploited the window of Russia's weakness much more aggressively to position itself as best as possible for the impending confrontation. It can be argued that the only way to avoid this confrontation would have been for NATO to put itself in such a position of strength that it would have made it clear to Russia that it could only lose such a confrontation.

By positioning itself more robustly in Eastern Europe, NATO could have deterred future Russian aggression and solidified its influence in the region. This approach would have involved leveraging NATO's superior military and economic power to create a security environment where Russia would clearly understand that any confrontation would be unwinnable. While this might have temporarily increased tensions, it could have prevented the long-term escalation that eventually led to the invasion of Ukraine. Such a strategy would have been particularly effective when Russia was in a weakened internal political position, in the 1990s and early 2000s. This was a time when Russia, despite protesting against NATO expansions, had no real means to counter them effectively.

This approach is certainly seen as particularly harsh and realistic, especially from the perspective of the time when it should have been initiated. From today's viewpoint, where the actual approach chosen by NATO can be considered a complete failure, one could argue that it would have been worth the short-term risk. Especially if one believes that it could have prevented today's situation in Europe and the war in Ukraine. It might not have been a pleasant and hopeful solution as envisaged in the early 1990s, but it could have prevented the conflict.

**By positioning itself more robustly in Eastern Europe, NATO could have deterred future Russian aggression...**

**NATO was very appeasement-oriented in the early 1990s, followed by a wave of expansion in the late 1990s and up to 2004, then back to a rather weak response to the annexation of Crimea.**

The counterargument to this approach would be that such a strategy against a nuclear power like Russia would have involved too much risk and short-term, unpredictable escalation potential. Especially when considering that the anti-Western narrative in Russia would likely have interpreted such NATO actions as a massive and direct threat to Russia's national security. Which would have multiplied the Russian reaction and would probably have further intensified the escalation spiral.

It can be concluded that a deeper understanding of the Russian national security perspective would have been a necessary step for NATO. However, even if we assume that this understanding had been achieved to a sufficient extent, it is still not clear which alternative political decisions should have resulted from it. One approach would have involved long-term risks by weakening NATO's position, while the other would have brought massive short-term escalation potential.

The actual approach chosen by NATO can be described as a cautious mix between these two extremes. It remains open whether this combines the advantages or disadvantages of the other two approaches. The fact that the war in Ukraine broke out can be seen as a strong argument for the latter—that NATO's approach combined the disadvantages of both extremes.

Moreover, it should be noted that NATO has repeatedly tended towards one of the two extremes over time since the end of the Cold War. Initially, NATO was very appeasement-oriented in the early 1990s, followed by a wave of expansion in the late 1990s and up to 2004, then back to a rather weak response to the annexation of Crimea. This behavior was often justified by short-term necessities (sometimes justifiably so), but in the long term, it did not positively influence NATO's strategy towards Russia.

Here, one must refer back to the baseline differences explained at the beginning. NATO is an alliance of many democratic countries, which means its policies and decisions are always compromises. The often-changing governments of individual countries make these compromises much less consistent in the long term, as each administration brings a different approach to foreign policy. This raises the question: Does NATO's fundamental structure and that of its member countries even allow for a long-term and effective strategy towards Russia?

All these alternative courses of action discussed here are, of course, limited to NATO's actions. This in no way implies that Russia's actions were justified or that Russia could not have or should not have behaved differently. On the contrary, Russia remains the aggressor and the sole responsible party for the illegal war of aggression in Ukraine. However, the central question of this paper is

why NATO's approach to relations with Russia after the end of the Cold War failed. Therefore, the focus of the analysis is on NATO's actions and mistakes.

## **SYNTHESIS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS**

In conclusion, the failure of NATO-Russia relations can be attributed to a fundamental mismatch in their security perspectives and narratives. NATO's failure to understand the depth of Russia's anti-Western narrative, and Russia's historically grounded notions of national security and what constitutes a threat to it. Additionally, understanding that disregarding this perspective on national security would further strengthen the anti-Western narrative, thus making NATO a threat and therefore an enemy to Russia.

Russia's refusal to engage with NATO's security concerns further created an environment where confrontation was inevitable. The lessons from this relationship highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the underlying narratives that drive international relations.

NATO's approach, characterized by a mix of expansion and appeasement, failed to account for the deep-rooted narratives and historical experiences that shaped Russia's actions. But also, did not put NATO in a position of strength that prevented potential conflict by making them unwinnable for Russia. Russia's actions on the other hand, driven by a narrative of existential threat from the West, were interpreted by NATO as unjustified aggression.

Looking forward, it is crucial for both sides to engage in a more profound understanding of each other's perspectives. This requires not only diplomatic efforts but also a willingness to confront and address the historical and cultural factors that underpin these narratives. The dilemma of NATO-Russia relations, however, is that even if this understanding of the security perspectives and narratives that exists on both sides, it does not mean that there is a way for both actors to abandon their perspectives and narratives. Which would be the first necessary step to achieve a positive relationship.

## **FURTHER RESEARCH**

Further research could explore how a stronger NATO policy earlier on might have impacted the Ukraine conflict. Understanding the potential outcomes of a more assertive NATO stance could provide valuable insights into future policy decisions. Such research could consider counterfactual scenarios where NATO took a harder line during the 1990s and early 2000s, examining whether this might have deterred Russian aggression or led to a different trajectory in NATO-Russia relations. **IAP**

**...the failure of NATO-Russia relations can be attributed to a fundamental mismatch in their security perspectives and narratives.**

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